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ABSTRACT

The relationship between staff orientations and children's performance levels is examined by comparing correlations obtained on these factors in centralized and decentralized institutions for neglected, dependent, abused, and disturbed children. Comparisons are also made of results obtained on the performance of new admissions, children in care between 1 and 2 years, and children who have been in care over 5 years. The sample was composed of 11 institutions centralized in decision-making structures, and eight decentralized institutions. Staffs completed questionnaires on childrearing philosophy and community orientation. Children were tested using the Lorge-Thorndike IQ Test Verbal Abilities Battery. Also measured was the children's sense of self-direction and their perceived levels of task and social relations skills. Results showed no clear relationship between staff orientation and the types of decision-making structures within which they operate. Analysis reveals, however, that child performance scores fluctuate more frequently in concert with fluctuations in staff orientation scores in decentralized institutions than in centralized institutions. Also, the number of associations between staff orientations and child performance levels increases the longer a child resides in a decentralized institution. (ST)

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The Impact of Staff Orientations on Child Performance in Centralized and Decentralized Children's Institutions

By George Thomas[1]

For as long as most of us care to remember, theorists have been asserting that involving people in decision-making processes has important effects on their behavior.

Scattered evidence suggests that increasing decision-making involvement among participants yields stronger commitments, greater readiness to change, and improved self concepts, among other things.

Conversely, shutting participants out of the decision-making process is believed to induce apathy, resentment, and perhaps hostile behavior.

This paper reports data on this issue as it applies to residents of institutions for neglected, dependent, abused, and disturbed children.

Specifically, the relationship between staff orientations and children's performance levels is examined by comparing correlations obtained on these factors in decentralized institutions to those obtained in centralized institutions.

Additionally, comparisons are made for results obtained on this relationship for new admissions, children in care between 1 and 2 years, and children who have been in care over 5 years. From the standpoint of an input-process-output model of organizations, decision-making structures are considered a given, that is, the

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input. Staff orientations on the care and treatment of resident children are considered intervening factors that shape the processing of resident children, and children's performance levels are considered the output.

Sample

Data for this study derive from a larger multi-year research project focused on experimentally inducing community-oriented care in all institutions for dependent/neglected children in Georgia.

In the larger study 33 institutions were evaluated on a variety of performance measures to determine, among other things, the nature of their decision-making structures.

A nine factor evaluation technique was devised to assess decision-making structures that yielded scores on such factors as percentage involvement in daily life decision-making by all levels of staff--including children, degree of centralization of final authority, and the types of rewards/discipline handed out and by whom.

Eight institutions scoring above the average (for 33 institutions) on 8 or all 9 factors comprise the sample of decentralized institutions used for this study. The centralized group is composed of 11 institutions scoring below the average on 7 or more of the 9 factors.

The 8 decentralized institutions have a total of 67 staff, 253 resident children, and range in child population size from 10 to 97. The 11 centralized institutions have a total of 88 staff, 359 resident children, and range in child population size

from 10 to 63.

Measures of Staff Orientations

All staff in each institution were asked to complete several questionnaires, two of which are of concern here. First, general child-rearing philosophy was determined from a 36 item battery with low scores reflecting an orientation toward child dominance and high scores an orientation toward child acceptance.

Secondly, a 12 item community-orientedness battery placed each staff member relative to a preference toward working in and with the surrounding community or in isolation from it. Our view at the outset was that staff high on child acceptance and community-orientedness would exert the most beneficial influence on resident children.

Measures of Resident Child Performance

All resident children were group tested in their institutions to obtain their learning performance levels (utilizing the Lorge-Thorndike IQ Test Verbal Abilities Battery), their perceived levels of task and social relations skills (the latter in terms of cottage and school mates, school teachers and cottage parents), and their felt sense of self direction in the management of their daily lives.

These measures reflect our view that a resident child is functioning well enough to get along nicely in his own community if he is doing well in school, perceives himself as adequate or better in task and social relations skills, and has a reasonable sense of being involved in and influencing decisions governing

his behavior.

Overall Results

Contrary to our initial expectations, there is no clear relationship between staff orientations and the types of decision-making structures within which they operate. Individual staff members and whole institutional staffs are found to rank low on both orientations even though their decision-making structures are decentralized, and vice versa.

In fact, staff members in centralized institutions generally express more favorable orientations than their counterparts in decentralized institutions.[2]

Correlational analysis reveals, however, that child performance scores fluctuate more frequently in concert with fluctuations in staff orientation scores in decentralized institutions than in centralized institutions.

In decentralized institutions high correlations are found between child-rearing philosophy and perceived task (.76) and social relations (.67) skills.[3] Community-orientedness is strongly associated with perceived task skills (.58) and sense of felt control (.71).

In centralized institutions, only one substantial correlation was obtained, that between child-rearing philosophy and sense of felt control (.54).

These results suggest that staff orientations are getting through to children and influencing their self perceptions and

performances more profoundly in decentralized institutions.

It is particularly noteworthy that as community-orientedness among staff increases in decentralized institutions, scores of residents go up on perceived competence in task skills and sense of felt control over daily lives.

As previously noted, many staff in centralized institutions score high on community orientedness, and yet, this does not seem to elicit any pronounced level of response from children in care.

Results Controling for Length of Stay[4]

New Admissions (1-3 months in residence)

Child-rearing philosophy is strongly associated with residents' perceived competence in task skills (.83) in decentralized institutions while the same orientation shows a substantial relationship to levels of learning performance (.82) in centralized institutions.

Community orientedness is not highly correlated with any child performance measure for new admissions in either group of institutions. This is not surprising because community-orientedness would be more likely to affect children following a longer period of exposure to institutional practices, if at all.

The difference in significant associations between the two groups of institutions related to child-rearing philosophy, however, probably can be attributed to staff preferences in the selection of new admissions.

Decentralized institutions appear to concentrate more on admitting "doers" while centralized institutions seek out "learners." It is possible to reason here that differences in decision-making

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structures influence this outcome.

Since all institutions seek children who will ultimately reflect well upon their services (as successful cases), they likely will try to select children who will do well in their existing systems.

A decentralized system requires children capable of involvement or engagement while a centralized system would be disrupted by a child of this sort. Rather, centralized systems better fit children capable of successful performance in a more passive mode (excellence in school as reflected in learning performance).

Children in Care Between 1 and 2 Years

The number of substantial associations between staff orientations and child performance measures increases in decentralized institutions for children in care an intermediate length of time, comparing to results for new admissions.

Here, child-rearing philosophy is strongly related to both perceived competence in tasks (.68) and social relations (.62), and community-orientedness emerges as an influential factor in relationship to task skills (.79).

In centralized institutions, by contrast, no substantial correlations or significant relationships were observed.

Children in Care Over 5 Years

The same pattern continues in even more dramatic fashion for long-term care cases.

Here, staff child-rearing philosophy reflects a substantial link with child learning performance levels (.97) and sense of

felt control (.99), and community-orientedness bears significant relationships with learning performance levels (.98), perceived competence in task skills (.95) and sense of felt control (.94).

Again, no large correlations or significant relationships are in evidence for long term cases in centralized institutions.

Conclusions

At least two important conclusions seem warranted on the basis of the results.

First, existing decision-making structures seem to influence the process of selecting new admissions in the sense that children are sought who have potential for fulfilling institutional definitions of success. Only certain types of children hold out promise of being successful in certain types of decision-making structures.

Active children who perceive themselves as competent in task skills could well be disruptive (non-successes) in a system that allows for little such behavior or engagement.

Conversely, children who excell in more passive pursuits such as school work might be excellent candidates for centralized institutions but potential non-successes (i.e., non-engagers) for decentralized institutions.

Secondly, analysis of associations between staff orientations and child performance levels reveals stronger and more numerous relationships in decentralized institutions. Indeed, the number of such associations increases the longer a child is in residence in decentralized institutions, while, by contrast, no such pattern is in evidence in centralized institutions.

It would seem clear from these results that staff orientations have greater and more general impact on shaping resident child self perceptions and performances in decentralized institutions than in centralized institutions, for good or evil.

This simply means that decentralized decision-making structures expose the resident child to favorable as well as unfavorable influences from staff. In contrast, centralized decision-making structures appear to prevent either favorable or unfavorable staff influences from making much of a dent on resident children.

Each type of structure would seem to have its pluses and minuses. Decentralization can contribute to increasing the effectiveness of a competent staff. On the other hand, an administrator with serious doubts about his staff's capabilities might be well advised to retain central control.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Dr. Thomas is Director, Regional Institute of Social Welfare Research, (RISWR), University of Georgia, and Project Director for the Children's Institutions research program being conducted at RISWR in cooperation with the Georgia Department of Human Resources. Support for work on this paper and the total research program is provided by the Office of Child Development, DHEW, Grant #OCD-CB-106.

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[2]Staff in centralized institutions record a mean of 86.13 on child rearing philosophy and 30.43 on community orientedness compared to means of 80.13 and 26.29 respectively for staff in decentralized organizations.

[3]All correlations (r) cited in this paper surpass a $p < .05$ level for a one way t test of significance of association.

[4]Sample sizes for analyses controling for length of stay are:

	Decentralized			Centralized		
	Inst.	Staff	Children	Inst.	Staff	Children
New Admissions	6	58	68	5	45	39
1-2 years	8	67	81	9	78	103
5 years +	3	26	28	9	80	63

An identical series of 32 correlations was run on both groups of institutions (2 staff orientations X 4 child performance measures X 3 time periods + totals). Probability of a chance occurance of a correlation significant at the .05 level is given in terms of $(1-.95)^{32}$. But it is the difference in patterns of significance between the two institutional subsamples, not individual correlations that is important. No method was found to test this difference, although it clearly exists: 13 of 32 correlations proved significant for decentralized institutions, only 2 of 32 for centralized institutions. Significance can be estimated however, in terms of the larger sample sizes for centralized institutions and higher staff orientation scores. The former factor reflects greater potential variation within samples and the latter a potentially more potent intervening variable. These should combine to yield higher correlations than found for decentralized institutions, all other things being equal, but did not.